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*Not in These Shoes* by Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch

Miriam Gamble, September 2008

*Not in These Shoes*, the second collection from Welsh poet Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, charts a variety of issues, from the imminent disappearance of a beloved local community to the empowerment of (Manolo Blahnik wearing) 'modern woman.' Wynne-Rhydderch writes predominantly in free verse and, whilst some poems display considerable technical skill, others fall embarrassingly short, displaying little logic in their choice of line and stanza breaks. Louis MacNeice describes free verse as something which, in order not to be 'dead', 'must be conforming to some order which we do not immediately notice': when, on a third reading, such an order has still failed to reveal itself, one might well conclude that it simply isn't there. The poems oscillate between short, sassy sentences and long meandering clauses, neither of which displays much feel for the 'necessary tension' between freedom and shape constitutive of the energised poem. Additionally, even the best pieces are often lessened by the inclusion of banal or throwaway turns of phrase: I'm no enemy to the conversational in poetry, but there's a knack to it, and Wynne-Rhydderch has yet to master its nuances.

The blurb to *Not in These Shoes* introduces its author as a notable poet of 'voice,' capable of assuming any number of different personae, and it's true the collection displays considerable imaginative range. From

the confession of a gay photographer snapping his male subject to the narrative journey of a ship's figurehead, the choice of speakers confirms Wynne-Rhydderch as a writer with an eye to the interesting perspective. Her execution of monologue is, however, more often than not disappointing: in 'Matador,' a well-achieved octave is let down by a sestet that fails to deepen or develop imaginative empathy with the photographer's silenced passion. And in the sequence 'The Naming of the Storm' (the monologue of the figurehead 'Anna-Louise'), the poems are beset by a disappointing tendency to substitute sass for substance and significance – leaving aside the fact that the sequence ends with the inadvisable move of quoting a Bob Dylan lyric (and thus appears to be asking the wind to come and shelter from, well, the wind), there is little within this series of four poems to stimulate or grasp the reader's imagination. We spend more time being pouted at by the eponymous heroine than we do, for example, finding out what it's like to spend a hundred years on the sea floor or to be nailed to the front of a ship, or what the world looks like from either of these positions.

It is not the case that Wynne-Rhydderch lacks the imaginative equipment to engage convincingly with otherness. The sonnet 'Shaved,' which takes as subject matter the brutal murder of the Romanov children in the wake of the Russian revolution, is a perfectly achieved commingling of delicate pathos and relentless bureau-speak, image and statement: interweaving extracts from Anastasia Romanov's diaries with the 'bald facts' in 'The Executive Archive for that year' it captures simply and concisely the precise quality of horror contained within this crash between historical event and private history. Understatement serves her well here, as it does in the lovely elegy 'Brighton West Pier' which, with shades of W. G. Sebald, mourns the 'reclaiming by sea of our/ tentative steps.' Placing its focus on 'a telephone receiver' swinging 'from the tangled guts of the bar,' the speaker of the poem traces her own disappearing youth with syntax as 'precarious' and fragile as the 'staggering' pier itself:

... this reclaiming by sea of our  
tentative steps leaves me

precarious: those Saturday nights  
when I would catch my breath outside  
its stuccoed façade, stilettoed,

tiptoeing between strips of sea foaming  
below, a note from a saxophone  
thrown to the wind, hearing his voice

on the line half a century ago,

still swaying there.

(This, incidentally, is free verse as it should be, with the structure displaying coincidence with the subject.) Rather, it seems that Wynne-Rhydderch has been poisoned or led astray by the very thing for which she has been most lauded: that obsession with 'voice'. In the introduction to the American published *New British Poetry* (2004), Don Paterson is right to describe 'voice', 'that absurd passport we are obliged to carry through the insecurity of our age' as 'an extraliterary issue'. As the monologues are afflicted by a tendency to posture rather than relate or imply, so too many of the poems in Wynne-Rhydderch's own voice lean heavily towards the over-demonstrative verbal gesture. Usually delivered in conjunction with an unlikely self-presentation as 'great artist' (as against the failure-man-artist to whom this poem is addressed), these appear both unappealing and irrelevant:

Your words  
interrupt the lines in my head, bisecting a life  
of art ...

me ground down,  
sitting by the phone, dusted with tragedy ...  
Not likely. Ten years ago you stayed at home

weaving your stagnant tale whilst I travelled the world  
with my pen eloping from island to island ...

all the lies unwritten at your feet, whilst I, accurate

as the clock, move my hands in time to the verses you  
have untapped from my tongue by this one act of arrival

and departure. Take that word you can't articulate  
away with you. I'll keep the rest. I paid for them.

Has the time not come and gone for power women in poetry (and was there ever a time when power women who blustered in poems about how good they were at poetry were desirable, never mind necessary)? This brand of self-preening *femme fatale*-ness does its wearer few favours – no more so, in fact, than the equally pervasive strain of self-pitying damsel-in-distress-ness to which it is, somewhat curiously, hitched. Other poems present Wynne-Rhydderch as, contrastingly, the little girl to whom Madeira is fed by a doting partner – Lawrentian lover watching her big strong man from the upstairs window – and again (and most offensively to this particular woman) a present-day Cinderella, brandishing a Manolo Blahnik and waiting for her prince to arrive. Either I don't care or I'm not convinced – possibly both. In this day and age, women shouldn't (and don't) need to bounce off men baring their teeth in order to write poetry. A little decorum, please!

In fact, Wynne-Rhydderch is at her best when she takes a step back from all this vocal puff and palaver: whilst the sequence 'Ar Werth – For Sale' also falls victim to polemical slabber (this time on the subject of

holiday homes in her native New Quay), as elegist for the disappearing communities of the Welsh sea-board she displays a painterly exactitude comparable to that of Michael Longley, and capable of a similarly hard-hitting, brittle beauty. Sharing Longley's taste for (and ability to handle) the mnemonic 'trace' – the pegged long-johns in Cook's bunker, the mother's 'sequined gloves/ in love with each other in a pool of light' – she evokes with exquisite delicacy that which has departed or faces imminent demise, providing, in the latter case, vital if painful documentary of a world on the verge of immolation. Her knowledge of this world is intimate – the sea, and the dangers of sea life (and life threatened by the sea), loom large in a collection which charts with journalistic relentlessness the encroaching forces of erosion and unemployment: although the poem 'You Can't Get Away From It All' asserts that 'There is always an edge/ to the land that you cannot go beyond,' that line seems blurred in poems where boats are living spaces, and gardens the playground of a tide which 'now greets us with its frothy laugh/ at the front gate.' Depictions of interiors are also striking: Wynne-Rhydderch is an impressive mistress of domestic space, and it allows her to produce the kind of poem in which the narrative is embedded in the details rather than brandished up front. Whilst 'A Pair of Antlers' and 'Stately Home' concern themselves with houses which have already been left – have fallen into the past tense – 'The Sea Painter's House' focuses on one which, like the community itself, teeters on the brink of disappearance: a kind of fossil or preservation in aspic, home to a fox who 'walks rigid in his display case' and outside of which the water waits, 'locked out/... its rough tongue whitening the chairs.' The brushstrokes are perfectly incremented here, each individual image part of a larger picture which is both familial and public; which speaks volumes without having to say a word about its underlying thrust. Wynne-Rhydderch also achieves this on a larger scale: even to an Ulster reader, the (almost) haiku 'Titanic' strikes with poignancy and assurance on a subject on which it might be thought there couldn't be anything left to say:

Cadences  
before water filled the open lung  
of the baby grand.

As her painterly affinities suggest (paint being the medium in which things are consigned to stasis, and also in which they best maintain the illusion of being preserved), Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch's imagination prefers living in the past to the present, stilled to kinetic scenarios. A risky choice, perhaps, but it's this reader's opinion that she ought to let it stay there if it wants to: there's room for anything in poetry, fashionable or otherwise, so long as you have the requisite skills to pull it off. If you don't, fashion-consciousness seems somewhat beside the point.

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